show me where it hurts (i'll lick it clean)

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by antiheroblake

Summary

at 18, will inherits a ranch upon the death of his father, a man who died from a supposed family curse. at 33, will becomes prone to accidents, and the new town doctor starts to see him more than he sees his cattle.

day one: cowboys

Notes

i lost the plot

1875 – SOMEWHERE IN THE WEST

The ranch has been in his family for three generations now, passing from hand to hand as early as 18. When his grandfather came out here, leaving Louisiana to raise up cattle, everyone told him it was a bad idea. Moving his wife and son out into the middle of nowhere with miles and miles of nothing. There were a few other families coming to settle with them, but aside from them, there was no one. No stores, no hospitals, not even a damn church.

The town was built up around Graham Ranch, they were there first–or they made the most steady settlement first, and for a time, that meant something. People liked his grandfather, they tolerated his father, and Will–well, he's a recluse. His family's sway in the little town diminished, never fully disappearing but not quite what it used to be, and he kept to himself.

He was fine with that too. He never wanted the ranch, he didn't like cattle all that much, and he wasn't great with people so the buying and selling always had him prickly. However, it paid the bills, kept him comfortable, and ensured him that he had plenty of land to do what he wanted, it just wasn't a real passion of his. Besides, everyone knows the land is bad. Everyone who works it dies young, or younger than makes a lick of sense.

His grandfather was dead at 38, heart attack they said, five years after he moved, and his father took over at 20. His dad didn't make it to his grandfather's age, dead at 35, and the property was passed to Will at the young age of 18. And god above, did he try to sell it. He even knocked the price down twice to try and get anyone to buy it, but they'd all heard the stories. The patriarchs of the family dying during midlife, the matriarchs having stillborn, bleeding to death in their marital beds, ranch hands ended up dead on the land, in the stables, in the ponds or rivers that run through. No one wanted it, they washed their hands of it; people are superstitious. Always have been, always will be. Fear of god, he thinks.

Will's the only person who ever works the land now. Him, a pack of dogs, his half wild horse Abigail, and occasionally Peter–the only person who'll step foot on the property. He's not a real veterinarian, sure, but he knows a damn thing or two about it, and Will's happy for his assistance when he needs it. Of course, he won't hire him on full time, not willing to put his life on the line for the cattle.

Everyone else though? They steer clear of the ranch, and usually, of Will Graham. Most of the town says he's cursed too, first and only Graham child to be born on the land and live, the curse is practically in his blood. He is the living embodiment of it and no one wants that rubbing off on them.

A few people speak, interact, but he's not so sure they don't see him as the antichrist like the rest of the town. The good Christian in them makes them acknowledge his presence, but a lot of them go up to their little chapel and pray away his damnation. It's been like that since he was a boy in school, parents snatching their kids away when they got too close, and he figures it'll be like that up until the day he dies.

Nothing wrong with it, he doesn't mind being left alone. It's easier that way, no one to drag down with him, to mourn him when he dies suddenly, or to bleed to death in their bed when a

baby tears her apart. The Graham Ranch can go, split up and sold to people in the East, and their curse will go with him, six feet under and then farther, where it burns.

Most days he doesn't think too deeply about it, just tries to survive the hours he spends working, feeding, tending. The usual. Ever so often, however, someone comes around to bother him. A new person in town who wants to meet the elusive ranch owner and get to the bottom of what everyone says. To see the curse in his eyes like a kid finding god in a cemetery.

The chair on his porch creaks as he drinks from the whiskey in his glass. His body hurts from riding the horse so long, fixing the fence after last night's storm and wrangling in the cows that decided to try and make a break for it. The whiskey goes through his system and relaxes his tense muscles, lets him find some peace in the lowering sun.

Distantly, he hears the neighing of a horse. The sound spurs his mood immediately, causing him to throw back the whiskey in one quick gulp and pour himself a second glass. He expects to see Jack Crawford, or even that no good Freddie Lounds, but the horse that trots up is black, shiny, mane braided delicately.

"You must be Mr. Graham. I've heard a great deal about you." The man says from his horse.

Will looks him over, trying to get a good look at the stranger that is, for all intents and purposes, trespassing on his property. He's dressed far better than anyone naturally born in their little town, with nicely tailored trousers and the sort of buttoned shirt that had pearl buttons. His face is mostly covered in shadows because of the sun, but his accent is thick and warm. It warms up Will's inside, gets stuck in his brain like scripture.

Will eyes the man strangely, refusing to adjust his slack position. "And who are you supposed to be?"

"My apologies. My name is Hannibal Lecter, I'm the new town doctor." He says, tutting softly so his horse comes to a stop by his porch. "I have been going around and introducing myself to everyone. Miss Bloom informed me that you lived quite the distance from town and if I wanted to make your acquaintance I would have to come seek you out."

Will makes a noise, a huff or a laugh. "Didn't know doctors came all the way out here to live, not any worth a damn. Seems like a shitty way to make money."

"I'm not in need of money." Doctor Lecter laughs like Will said a joke. "I just wanted to introduce myself and offer you my services. I heard you live on quite the ranch. If you were to ever need a doctor–"

"Yeah, yeah. I know. We've had our fair share of doctors before. Just do yourself a favor and stay away from here. Duck your ass back toward town and sell your con somewhere else." Will takes a swig of his whiskey, already aggravated with conversation and the man trying to impose upon his tranquility.

"I can assure you, I'm no conman. I have my medical degree." Doctor Lecter insists gently, a sudden edge to his tone at being called a liar. "I heard that you are a cowboy."

“I’m a rancher.” Will spits, pushing himself up from the chair. The dogs start to crowd his legs, prepared to go inside the house. “My family was here before the cowboys.”

Doctor Lecter tilts his head in examination. Despite his inability to make out the man’s face in the shadowy light, Will can tell he’s going over him with sharp observation. “And will it be here after?”

“Goodbye, Doctor Lecter.” He pushes the door open, letting the dogs pile in first before he disappears into the house, not giving the Doctor another chance to speak, to continue this conversation.

Will shakes his head once he’s in, safe in the comfort of these old walls. He puts the glass down and the whiskey back in his cabinet. That accent is there, in his head, trying to split him open like a flint knife. He can feel it all the way down in his belly, slipping between the soft skin and wriggling organs that make up the whole of his person.

That’s how it started. Will isn’t fond of doctors no how, and this one in town, Doctor Hannibal Lecter, is not the exception. Any time he sees him, on that rare occasion Will moseys on into town to get something, Doctor Lecter always finds a reason to come speak and Will always finds a reason to be abrasive. His dislike grows more and more with every stunted conversation, with every greeting, with every little move to try and get Will to stay just a little bit longer.

At least, it grows until the first time he saves his life. Bad luck’s what it is. An accident on the ranch, cut himself clean open. Blood pours from the gash through his stomach, and he holds his hand there like his organs might slip out if he doesn’t. It feels the same way the sharp edges of Doctor Lecter’s accent does, just with less precision.

Peter’s there, an odd day for him to be out on the ranch, but one of the dogs needed a good looking over, and the sound of Will’s scream from the barn freaks him out enough that he left the creature be and meekly stumbles to check on Will. Usually, he yells because he’s fighting one of the damned snakes or one of the cows decides to reject its calf, but this isn’t a yell. It’s a scream, and upon seeing him with his fingers soaked in thick, black blood, Peter loads him up on his little wagon and hauls ass to town. Even as Will tells him not to, even as the blood gushes from him like a broken dam, Peter makes him lay on the wagon and keeps it together to get him to that damned Doctor he’s so keen on hating.

Will’s pretty sure he was gonna die, it only makes sense. The freezing pain of the ax is dulling, the cloth that Peter shoved up against the wound is soaked through a sickening crimson, and a mix of white and black spots has started appearing in his eyes.

“It was a freak accident,” Peter says in a frantic softness, the sound of footsteps around the wagon brings Will back to reality. “Tripped and fell on his ax, I think. I didn’t know what else to do. He said not to take him but the blood didn’t stop.”

“You did the right thing.” Doctor Lecter assures him gently. Will watches him through the white spots in his vision, hardly able to make him out even now, feels him move the cloth and grunt at the sight of the wound. “Let’s get him in.”

It hurts to be moved. He isn't expecting it to, but it does, worse than the original fall. The wound sizzles with pain and Will gasps, his vision suddenly coming back in full clarity as he pushes against Doctor Lecter as he tries to move him.

It shocks him when he realizes Doctor Lecter isn't just moving him, but tucks his arms under him and carries him in without assistance. He picks him up fully and Will chokes on air, pain shooting up in him, and here comes this man, moving him around like he weighs nothing. Peter struggled to get him up on the cart to bring him here. Will's in shape, heavier than most from years on the ranch, most people would have a hard time picking him up. Whoever this man is, he's built like a farm hand despite his well tailored clothes and tantalizing accent.

He's placed on the little bed in his office. Blood soaks down over him, his clothes are ruined, this bed is ruined, and when he turns to look at the Doctor, he can tell his well tailored suit is ruined. Everything is red, or white, or burning him up.

Doctor Lecter is quick, working quietly. The feeling of the needle in his skin doesn't compare to anything that came before, but his body still reacts to it, muscles twitching and tensing each time he pulls his skin close together.

Will's eyes roll haphazardly, he licks his lips to try and wet them. His voice is crass, broken into little pieces. "You should've just let me die."

"What sense is there in an untimely death that can be fixed," Doctor Lecter scolds, eyebrows scrunched together as he drags his needle through Will's skin and waits for the muscle to calm.

Will's jaw ticks, wheezing when he feels the needle poke through his skin and thread him back up the last little bit, pulling it all together finally. "I think I'd rather be dead."

"Nonsense. You should be at a hospital," Doctor Lecter says as he ties off the stitches, clipping it.

"And where do you suppose we're gonna find a hospital around here, Doctor?" Will winces. "How'd you stop the bleeding?"

"The closest hospital is about, 75 miles away." Doctor Lecter stands, all bloodied hands and clinging clothed, and digs through a small cabinet. "I was trained to be a surgeon. You did not cut so deep that you spilled anything, but you would have bled out if Peter had not brought you here. Lucky you."

It takes effort to relax, to force himself to calm down and not think about the raw burn in his gut or that accent that seems to work overtime in making the desire to crawl out of his skin worse. Lucky him, for sure, he's never been so unmoored by another person in his life.

A few seconds pass, Will hears the clinking of bottles and then the cabinet shuts, and he comes back with a needle attached to a glass tube.

Will's eyes widen, his body tries to pull away but not prepared for such sudden movements, crumbles back down on the blood soaked bed. "What the hell is that!"

Doctor Lecter dips the needle near the wound, poking it through his skin, and then pushes down so the liquid goes into him, his wound. “You’ll live.”

“What is that thing?” Will asks as burning warmth erupts through his abdomen. He wants to claw it away, to peel back the layers of skin and clean his muscle and meat and bone out like people do with their hands when they touch him. “What did you do to me?”

The needle comes out and a droplet of blood pulls to the surface. “It’s a syringe. Relatively new, created in our lifetime. It takes liquid medicine and inserts it into the body. It helps much quicker than oral or topical by going into the blood.”

Will takes a few breaths, his abdomen twitching with each deep inhale he takes. “What did you give me, Doctor?”

Doctor Lecter smiles, and for the first time, Will catches a good look at his face. Without the blood, without the sun, he sees this Doctor, this Hannibal Lecter, and he thinks he might be dying, truly. His chest stutters strangely and his lungs hurt. Doctor Lecter is statuesque, older than him but no less attractive. His eyes are a peculiar shade of maroon and despite the blood on his face, it doesn’t impede upon the natural beauty of the man, if anything, it adds to the appeal.

He helps Will sit up as steadily as possible so he doesn’t pull a stitch or hurt himself further. “That was morphine, for the pain.”

“What about infection?” Will asks, cupping his side with his hand as if it might protect him.

Doctor Lecter looks at him for a moment, as if debating but he turns and hands him a small glass bottle, his fingers nearly slipping from the blood staining it. “Echinacea. Or the coneflower. Drink this tincture with water, I’d rather start you on something natural and hope it helps rather than use bromine.”

Will takes a few breaths, lets the beginnings of the morphine settle in and then kicks his feet off the side of the bed. “Thank you, Doctor. How much do I owe you?”

“I do think you should stay a while longer, the pain will return.” Doctor Lecter eyes him, at the spot his hand clings to protectively. “There’s a rumor that the men in your family die of odd causes, is that so?”

Will tenses and rubs his hand over the little bottle. He wonders when he’ll go wash his hands of him, if he’ll wait until Will is long gone or if he’ll do it the moment he gains confirmation – maybe it’s wrong, but he doesn’t want him to know. “Shouldn’t listen to rumors. It’s not very becoming, Doctor.”

Doctor Lecter blinks, slightly taken aback but accepting that perhaps he took it just a step too far, at least for now. “Of course, my apologies. I was just going to suggest we keep an open tab if you expect you’ll have more accidents.”

Even though the shirt is ruined, covered in a thick layer of blood and ripped open, Will still makes his best effort to tuck it into his pants to seem presentable. Each push of his hands

makes his body quiver, but he stays upright and attempts to make himself presentable despite it all.

He glares at the Doctor, but the anger there is hardly real. He wishes it was. Oftentimes he can make it real, he can brew an uneasy disdain for the people he's around, and while he truly wants to hate Doctor Lecter, he just saved his life and he's been nothing but polite. If only he was a rude son of a bitch, if only he tried to thump the Bible on him, but he hasn't. The only thing he's done is sew him up and get him medicine to help with the pain.

"I'll pay you instead," Will tries for anger, for hate, but all that comes out is this pathetic wheeze, the same noise he's been making since he fell on his ax. "I don't plan for this to become a regular occurrence."

"I'll take cash, I am much more sure you're good for it than many in town. I also accept goods." Doctor Lecter smiles and moves to his sink to wash Will's blood from his hands. "Goods are of much more value to me than anything else."

"What sort of goods?" Will asks, observing him clean the blood with a faucet that shoots water out into his sink. "The last… doctor we had here only accepted cash and he gave everyone liquid medicine that had some people acting foolish."

He's heard of it, indoor plumbing, but he wasn't aware they could get it all the way out here. No one he knows has it, it's a luxury few people can afford, and for a small town doctor to have such a thing, Doctor Lecter must be far richer than he gives off, not that he's trying to hide it any.

"Miss Bloom tailors my clothes." Doctor Lecter shakes the water off his fingertips and picks up a little towel.

"Alana's good for it." Wills agrees, touching the seam of his pants.

His clothes always bothered him something bad, his dad beat him into not mentioning the way the seams rubbed up his legs, but Alana, who really would have been some sort of doctor if the schools would've accepted her, said she'd worked with a little boy back in Baltimore who had similar troubles. Working with that boy made her such a good tailor, she was able to fix all of Will's clothes to fit best. Comfortable for all the horse riding and for everyday use. Since she always tailors Will's clothes special so he can see how that would be a fair trade.

"Yes, and her… roommate, Miss Verger. She brings me fresh produce from their garden." Doctor Lecter grins, all sharp teeth and darkening eyes.

Will shrugs one shoulder, chest empty of all air for a moment at the idea of Doctor Lecter knowing. No one knows, or if they do, they don't say anything–but he has. He knows and he's said it to Will, like he's aware Will knows it too. "Sounds right."

"Brian Zeller brings me eggs." Doctor Lecter continues. "Freddie Lounds–"

Will cuts him off and says, "I can pay cash."

“Mr. Graham, I know you insist that this will never happen again, but if there might be… a lot of this sort of accidents in the future, I think it would save us both if we traded for services.” Doctor Lecter walks him to the door, a hand hovering over his back but never touching. Even so, the warmth bleeds through. “I truly do think you should stay as well.”

“What do you want?” Will grabs the doorknob, ignoring the pain, ignoring the Doctor’s suggestions. He doesn’t want to hear it, he doesn’t care if he should stay or if he thinks he can help him. Nobody can help him, not with what he’s afflicted with.

“You raise cattle.” Doctor Lecter hedges.

Will hesitates, one of his hands going into his pocket to dig for his most likely blood drenched wallet. “Yes.”

“At the end of the year I would like a cow. To butcher it.” Bargaining, not the first time Will’s seen it, but given what he’s been told, he knows that it’s a good one. Will has premium cattle, it sells for more than anyones around, and it would be a great deal, all in all. He’d get medical attention and Doctor Lecter would get something to butcher.

Will looks at him out of the corner of his eye, lips drawn tight. “I don’t plan on having any more visits.”

Doctor Lecter smiles, teeth and all, and as much as it unsettles Will, it also makes warmth pool in his stomach again. Fuck the ax, the needle, the morphine, this was the real pain. “Then four dollars will do.”

Will palms him the cash, blood just sprinkled on the edge of the bills, and leaves with Peter, trying to settle his conflicting emotions and not grimace every time they hit a bump in the road.

That night, when the pains real bad, he has a glass of whiskey and thinks over the Doctor’s request. He could easily trade one measly cow for his services, he doesn’t see what harm it would do. Even if he doesn’t really think they’re all that necessary, even if he’s determined not to go back. It was a good offer.

However, he isn’t sure how much he should be around the Doctor. Something about his demeanor set off alarm bells and made some long buried feelings rile back up. It felt like staring into the eyes of his maker and undoer, hoping he wouldn’t send him down into fires and instead let him walk through the pearly gates.

He discards the thoughts. It isn’t necessary, he’s never going to need medical help again, and he’s never going to let himself in a room with Doctor Lecter again. Proximity will be his undoing, and the longer he thought about it, about those hands that stitched him up, the more he felt like he could do something dangerous.

It takes a few weeks, a few horrible weeks of trying and failing and having to take a million breaks every few twenty or so minutes, but he goes back to work, and once he can, he pulls his own stitches out. He doesn’t need to go back to Doctor Lecter for it, if anything, he downright refuses.

That's that, he thinks. He'll never have to see him again, or at least, he won't have to see him outside of the awkward conversation in the mercantile. A quick hello, an awkward handshake maybe, but nothing more. He's happy with that, there are no other choices to be had.

At least, he wishes it were so easy. The next time, three weeks after he's pulled the stitches out and his gut is scaring up nicely, he's bit by a snake. Should've died really, he was going to let it happen as he tried to stumble up his front porch while his calf throbbed and bled, but Peter pesters him. Peter's always been good about pestering him, even if he really doesn't mind it. So he pulls himself up on a horse and goes into town. Just to ease his mind, there's nothing to do, he knows, but Peter can have the peace of mind that he tried his best.

He's been preparing to die in his 30s for years anyway, so when the rattler snapped at him, he was sure it was over. It doesn't even bother him, the pain was one thing, but nothing compared to the ax in his stomach. Really, he was more than content to lay down and let whatever happen, happen, but Peter.

Worse, Doctor Lecter is all too pleased to see him. That man is something else, from the way he dresses to the feline curl of his lips. He greets Will, and has him take a seat on a chair in a different room than the one he was in last time. It's smaller, more intimate.

Doctor Lecter, for whatever he's worth, is able to treat it. It only takes one look and a little prodding for him to decide that it's not nearly as bad as he thought, and maybe Peter didn't have to fuss at him at all. A dry bite, apparently, and he's got a lot of things, random things, that'll help. Years of travel, he says as he cleans the bite on his leg. He's prepared for anything out here, for some reason. It's smart, he hates it.

"Not too bad at all." Doctor Lecter hums as he dabs the last bite of alcohol on it. Every so often, his fingers brush over Will's skin and he can't tell if it's an accident or on purpose but he knows it tingles in ways it shouldn't. "Peter will be pleased to know you're well."

"He likes me, I guess." Will lets him put a small bandage over the bite and then he snatches his pants leg back down. "How much?"

The room isn't big enough for the both of them–it is, but it feels like the walls have started closing in somehow. He thinks about how easy it would be to let him touch him longer, to feign pain and ask him to make sure it's fine. He thinks about all the other patients he's surely brought into the room.

"Why don't we discuss that cow?" Doctor Lecter suggests as he reorganizes the items on his desk.

"How do you expect to live if no one ever pays you?" Will questions him, pulling out his wallet to pull out a few dollars for him. He's not hearing this, he refuses. He will give him cash and they'll go on their merry ways, no need to add any fluff to their nonexistent relationship.

"I'm in no short supply of money, and it saves me dearly when I don't have to buy goods." Doctor Lecter turns back to him. "Goods out here are imported, making them far more expensive than they should be."

“How much?” Will asks again, standing, trying to make his way to the door as nonchalantly as possible. A part of him knows that he seems awkward, especially as he tries to remove himself from the room he’s starting to think is a personal office and not typically for medical use.

As he looks around, he sees the books, a painting, pencils. The desk in the room is meticulously organized, but strangely personal with an open journal and a few knick-knacks. The place he got the medicine from is small, a cabinet that holds other items, items that aren’t for medical use. He wonders if others get to come in this room again, and again it makes his stomach turn to think that they do.

Doctor Lecter almost sighs, Will sees it. His shoulders do all the movement, but his face stays as neutral as it can. He’s annoyed, maybe. “Two dollars, please.”

Will hands it over with a nod and then escorts himself out, and if anyone sees him, they must think he’s shaken. His shoulders haunch up, tight lines appearing around his eyes and mouth. Again, he swears to himself that he will never see Hannibal Lecter again.

The next time it’s worse. He drowns, or almost does. His horse, Abigail, gets spooked by a rattlesnake (He thinks it’s the same snake that bit him, comes back to get revenge) and bucks him off. He doesn’t know if he hits his head, it’s very likely, because he ends up in the little pond the cows like to drink out of next to the house.

Peter, someone saint him, drags him out. His shaky hands pulling an unconscious Will up into the grass, nervous about this one more than the last two. Will doesn’t wake up, he doesn’t scream, and even though Peter tries to force the water out of his lungs the same way he might a dog, Will hardly moves except to cough. There’s blood, not nearly as much as when he cut himself open, but it diluted in the pond water and runs over his nose and eye.

“Mr. Graham!” Peter calls, cutting part of his shirt to blot around and stop the bleeding. “Mr. Graham, can you hear me?”

Will makes a noise, his eyelids move, but nothing more happens, and that’s enough for him to haul him back into town and to their forever generous town doctor.

“He’s clumsy.” Doctor Lecter moves the piece of cloth from his face, luckily the bleeding’s stopped and he’s breathing. “You did well, Peter.”

“I didn’t see what happened, just Abigail started off like she does when she spooks and I knew he was watching the cattle on her. The pond’s not deep.” Peter steps in with him as Hannibal moves Will into the clinic room. “I got water out of his lungs.”

“You certainly saved his life.” Doctor Lecter rubs his chest hard and Will coughs up more water. It isn’t nearly as much, thankfully, and he takes his stethoscope to listne to his lungs. “His lungs sound good, we’ll have to wait and see if there’s any damage but you’ve done very well.”

Will is breathing, he’s reacting to stimuli, but he’s not awake. This obvious fact doesn’t settle either of them, but there’s nothing more to be done.

Peter nods, taking the dismissal as what it is. “I’ll go get Abigail and bring her up here, tie her up front for when he’s ready.”

Doctor Lecter squeezes his shoulder, offering him something close to a genuine smile before sending him on his way to get the horse and then take himself home.

Worry pulls his face down hard, deepening the lines from age and years and stress–Will is a new stressor in his life, one he wasn’t expecting all the way out here, but he can’t say he’s unhappy with it. He’s an interesting man, Will Graham, and his insistence on distance makes him all the more enticing. Even more so, this curse that nearly everyone in their town tries to warn Hannibal of.

Don’t get to close to Graham, there’s always been something off about his family.

That man is the human embodiment of that curse.

Don’t touch him! If you have to be sure to go to the chapel and ask to be Blessed!

All of it seems pointless, however, Will does seem to have an affinity for getting hurt. He wonders if even the pool of Bethesda could cure him of this supposed ailment, or if his own hands would have to serve in place of angels. Could even a Holy being cute this? Can anything? Morbidly, he hopes not, he hopes he has to keep coming back to him, needing stitches and morphine and the delicate but clinical touch of his hands.

For a long while he watches him, it feels like torture. Will’s so close, his soft breaths the only sign of life for much of it. Once, Doctor Lecter brushes a few of his curls from his face, soft strands that smooth through his fingers like silk. He wants to do more, the feel more of this softness, to know it like he knows himself, but Will won’t allow it, at least not yet. Eventually, maybe, but not today.

Throughout the night he remains still, only stirring when Doctor Lecter comes to prompt him. It isn’t until early the next morning that he finally wakes up, feeling road hard and hung up wet, he tries to move and immediately lays back down, head throbbing something fierce.

The noise he makes wakes Doctor Lecter who had fallen asleep in a chair. Unlike most people, he doesn’t startle awake, he just blinks, gains his full consciousness like a god, and then leans forward to touch Will’s shoulder.

“Three times now, Will.” Doctor Lecter whispers, attempting to soothe him as he gasps for deeper breaths of air, as he curls into himself from the pain that radiates from where he hit his head. “This almost seems intentional.”

“Don’t you know? That lands out to get me. No, something worse.” Will’s chest heaves, he feels sick. His gentle breaths have been replaced and everything feels prickly like he’s rolled around in poison ivy. “I’m gonna die, you can’t stop it.”

Doctor Lecter makes a gentle noise and moves himself from the chair to the side of the bed. “You put that energy in it, Will, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth.”

Will sighs and closes his eyes, trying to get his head to stop pounding, to make the prickling of his skin go away. He can smell the pond water on him, under his nails and forces his clothes to cling. There's also something almost chemical, and he wonders if Doctor Lecter gave him another shot. If not, he could really use one to stop this.

"You don't get it," Will croaks out and makes a pitiful attempt at getting up again. "No one gets it."

"I could." Doctor Lecter stands, walking slowly to the sink. Will hears the water run and then a cold, wet cloth is placed across his forehead. "Rest, if you're set on leaving, you can leave once I've assessed you for a few hours."

Will peeks out at him but doesn't say more for a few minutes. He hates to admit but there is a certain level of comfort that comes with the Doctor taking care of him. A warmth to it, and not the same warm blade that slices through him when his accent gets stuck in his head or when he smiles like he's in on something. This warmth is slow growing and is felt throughout the entirety of him. His toes curl and his fingers itch, each act of kindness softens him to the man.

He closes his eyes again, deciding to stay just a bit longer. He realizes his chest is burning, probably from breathing in nasty pond water, and doesn't feel like dealing with more than he has to. Three times the charm, he guesses. Three times he's going to end up denying Doctor Lecter exactly what he wants.

A week and a half after his near-drowning, Will comes into town without need for medical help. Overall he's just picking through the mercantile. Life on the ranch is easy, he's nearly completely self sufficient save for a few odd needs here and there. Today is no different, as he picks through, rubbing his fingers over the different textures of fabric and the smooth glass cups and porcelain items, he's only here for one thing. Still, he enjoys the idea of shopping, of buying things he doesn't need.

Lots of people in town do that, he knows. They buy to fill voids, to throw parties, to have the nicest things out of everyone. Then there are people who don't buy, not people like him, but people who fear materialistic things in case god wants to kill them for liking nice things. He's in a nice third box where he buys what he needs, dreams about buying what he doesn't, and goes back to his ranch and drinks two fingers of whiskey and feeds his dogs. He's not scared of god, but he doesn't have the personality or acquaintances to buy things like porcelain and nice glass cups.

"Hello Will," he hears from behind him, the deep accented voice of his doctor is close, maybe too close for what's decent. "What a surprise to see you here and not writhing in pain in my clinic."

Will removes his hand from the piece of fabric he was feeling for the possibility of a new shirt and turns to the town doctor. He rubs his fingers against his pants leg, trying to remove the feeling from himself.

"Hello Doctor Lecter," he manages a finicky smile, all teeth and zero comfort. "How have you been? I don't think it should be all that shocking that I'm okay."

Doctor Lecter touches the fabric, leaning in close to Will as he does. If they were too close before, now they're positively scandalous.Their bodies almost touch, the warmth of his breath causes goosebumps to rise over his neck and Will can feels him, the heat of his body radiating into him. It's horrible, diabolical, it's hard to deny.

"It's a rare sight to see you in town in one piece," Doctor Lecter whispers, his hand gliding up and away from the fabric, his fingers brushing the back of Will's hands, causing a slight shiver to run through him.

"Needed to pick up some feed," Will says, his breath caught in his throat. Doctor Lecter's fingers are touching his wrist now, wrapping around, rubbing his thumb over the skin there. "Or else I'd be on the ranch."

"I see," Doctor Lecter nods down to the bag he's got laid against his leg. Will feels his other hand ghosting up his side, almost there, almost touching.

Will turns his head to look behind him, to stare into his maroon eyes, and he try to read into his unsettling nature. To feel it like he intends. His fingers, the ones not being held hostage, tap against his leg. "Do you like animals, Doctor?"

Instantly, he cringes. Of all the things he could say, that's what decided to tumble out of his mouth. It was like simply being near the Doctor made him lose the sense god gave an earthworm. He hates it, he hates all of this, but he doesn't want it to stop either–he needs it to. He knows it would be the right thing to do, but his hand around his wrist and his breath against his neck is making him weak. Weaker than he should be.

"I had a horse when I was a young boy," Hannibal whispwrs fondly. "Cesar. He was a working horse, but I loved him dearly."

Will nods, the knowledge humanizes him, even if he asked it at possibly the worst time. However, it makes Will more comfortable to be close to him in this way. He knows something about him now, about who he is aside from his profession and the way he makes Will feel tangled up. "I'm fond of dogs. I have a few, they're helpful with the cattle."

"Peter mentioned you owned quite the pack. I believe I saw a few when I went to meet you." Doctor Lecter confides before he takes a step away from Will and focuses his attention on the fabric. His entire demeanor changes in a way Will hasn't seen with anyone except a few practices and professional liars – not a conman his ass.

Will blinks. It takes him a moment but he rolls his shoulders and picks up the bag of feed. He doesn't go back to look at the fabrics, reminding himself he doesn't really need a new shirt. He's only here for the feed. "Something like that, yeah."

The door bell jingles, and Will realizes why he stepped back in the first place. "Doctor Lecter," Sheriff Crawford greets, far too pleased to see him. His eyes dart over and he blinks, shocked. "Will, what a sight."

"As I was just telling him, Jack," Doctor Lecter comes over and shakes his hand with the man. "Typically I see him when he's found himself hurt, it's nice to see him well."

Will drops the bags of feed down on the counter and the shop owner scurries in from a back room, smelling of tobacco and cologne. He hears them talk in the background about a few people missing, no one from the town itself, but outliers and the oddness of it. Strange positions of bodies, missing organs, and Will glances over his shoulder at Doctor Lecter, the length of him.

People go missing sometimes, it's bound to happen around here. The land is unforgiving, even to people who aren't cursed. It does strike him as odd that organs are missing, that bodies are even found. A strange thing to take.

Doctor Lecter looks back at Will, his maroon eyes colder than he's ever seen them, vacant.

He turns back and starts picking out a few coins to try and meet the dollar amount without having to break a larger bill. He hates using his paper money for anything that could be paid for in coins. Either way, he knows the old man is going to clean the money anyway, might as well make it easy for him.

"One certainly can't be enough for your herd," Doctor Lecter says as he comes up and pays the price for him.

"This isn't for my herd, Doctor." Will sighs, and swats him away. He was nearly done and he hates the way the owner picks up Doctor Lecter's money without a problem. There won't be any cleaning that. "It's for your cow. Make her good and fat for you."

Doctor Lecter hesitates before a large smile breaks out across his face. "You plan to get into more unfortunate accidents then?"

"I plan to not have to keep paying you every time Peter decides I shouldn't die yet." Will snatches up the feed bags. "Don't pay for my shit again, Doctor. It makes me look poor."

Part of him wishes he was paying for the feed out of… something more than a desire to ruffle his feathers. That this act, the closeness they held just moments before Jack walked into the mercantile, was more than his insatiable need to disrupt Will, to see him squirm. What if it was more? What if there was a way to make it so? He thinks he might take it, to make his morbid interest something more solid.

Quickly, he shoves that thought away. He knows that he and Doctor Lecter have, above all else, a professional relationship. Sometimes his head, that feelings he gets when he's around other people, likes to run wild. He's reading into this more than he should, he's being toyed with and he's only doing his job when he comes by. Those touches are clinical, they lack a true warmth, and whatever his brain insists is there, is made up.

Loneliness. That's all this is. He should get another dog,

"Do you plan on seeing me again, Will?" Doctor Lecter teases him, his tone too playful to mean a doctor's visit, but Will refuses to think that. "Or are we going for a new record?"

Will rolls his eyes, forcing his walls all the way back up. "I'm sure next time I'll be dead."

Jack looks him over as Will makes his move to leave. His feet are heavy, deliberately trying to present himself as a threat, or at least as annoyed enough people won't bother him. That doesn't work though, and Jack says, "You're only 33, Will."

"The 30s are the time to go in my family," Will half shrugs, inching closer to the door. "I accepted that a long time ago."

"I know Freddie Lounds and Kade Purnell have started the rumor mill again, but I promise you, Will, the town doesn't truly believe your family's cursed." Jack tries to assure him. "We know you're good people."

Do they? He doesn't think so. Jack always tries to assure him that the town knows he comes from good stock, but it doesn't help. He feels like the prodigal son, but instead of leaving and gambling away his fortune, he's forced to eat the fatty calf every time he comes into town and the good people who don't fully hate him insist they don't believe the curse. It's fine if they do, it doesn't hurt his feelings. Everything points in that direction anyway.

Besides, he knows they do, everyone believes it. Everyone but Doctor Lecter, who for the most part, only seems to find it amusing. The idea of it anyway, when he talked about not understanding it, his Doctor seemed to dislike that. Maybe from an educational standpoint or something else, he doesn't know, but Will doesn't need to care.

"Either way, you've got yourself a good doctor. Saved me three times now." He makes it to the door and sighs in relief, the necessary socialization done. This horrible interaction is almost completely over. He just has to make it to his horse and out of town before another one of the nice, good people see him. "Now if you'll excuse me, I've got a ranch to manage."

He drops the bag onto his little cart. It holds a few other random items. A few replacement tools, meat from the butcher for the dogs, and a new watch since his decided to die in the pond for good.

He walks around the side of the building with his horse, trying to get out of view of the townspeople, and throws himself over and onto his saddle.

"Will," Doctor Lecter calls after him as he steps out onto the little side street. "Wait, I have something to ask you."

Pulling the reins, he meets Doctor Lecter halfway. No point in making him work harder than he has to. He's expecting him to ask for the money back for the feed, so he's already digging in his wallet to find it. "Yeah?"

Doctor Lecter holds a handkerchief over his face. It's been hotter than usual, drier, and the dirt roads are kicking up dust. "I was wondering if perhaps you would come to my house for dinner. Everyone in town has been a guest at my table, it would be a great pleasure to have you. Perhaps, even more so."

Will eyes him for a second and then reminds himself not to read too deeply into his actions. Just as he said, everyone in town has been a guest, Will is hardly special. "Can't, we'd have

to plan that well in advance." He rolls his shoulders once, listening to the crack of bones. "Thanks for the offer though, appreciate it. Maybe next time."

It sours his mood to think about the people in town getting treated exactly the same as him. Even though it makes sense, even though he should consider the fact he's hardly polite and Doctor Lecter only ever sees him with he's gravely ill. Will is–he coughs, heavy as he has been since the pond incident–a kicked puppy for the good Doctor to take pity on.

Will gently nudges his horse with his foot and leaves him there. There won't be a next time, he tells himself again even though he knows it's not true, the last thing Will needs is to be in a room alone with Doctor Lecter and have his mind run wild with fantasies that could never be. He'll give him the cow and that'll be that.

God, he's stupid. He always thought he was a smart man, that if he could've been anything else, he would've succeeded, but maybe not. He can't even keep his thoughts in check about a man he, by all accounts, dislikes more than anyone he's ever met.

The feeling of his hand against his wrist burns like nails through skin and bone; he thinks he'll always remember it. It wasn't like those touches in the clinic, there was nothing medical about it. For whatever reason the Doctor did that, whether malicious or not, Will plans to cherish the feeling. It's his now, it's the end of this silly little crush he's gained and no one can take it from him.

Resigning himself to that, he goes on to the ranch and settles into his routine. He's already singled out the cow for Doctor Lecter, who is more or less getting a free cow if Will has anything to do about it, and goes about his business. The rest are mostly grass fed, eating off the land while Will watches them from horseback, occasionally he has to get the dogs to pull them back closer to the ranch house itself, but for weeks he's fine.

Fine and losing his mind at the thought of the man in town. He's begun to take up so much of his mind he starts dreaming about him. He gets lost in thought for hours out in the pastures, just following the cattle and thinking up reasons he should go into town again. It's silly, childish, but it passes the time.

The next time he sees the Doctor, it's a bad one, and he shouldn't be thankful for it but he is. Abigail kicked him right in the ribs. Damn it, she's always been a wild one, easily spooked, and he doesn't know what she saw, if anything at all, but she sends him right on back into town.

He's wheezing for air, hand pressed against his side, as pain erupts through his chest. This one, this one is it, he's so sure of it. The pain is blinding, making it hard to make his way into town, making it hard to think at all. When her hoof made contact with his side, he felt his ribs crunch under the blow and when he tried to pick himself up, he screamed with the sort of force that makes someone's throat red and raw.

The dogs came around, bumping their noses against his trembling body as he laid there in shock. His mind wasn't able to keep up with what was happening, all he knew was that he was laying in grass, his body was writhing, and the dogs were trying to investigate it.

It took a few minutes, his body burning like someone damned, before he was able to push himself up. He didn't think he could mount her, so he took to walking, the dogs not far behind, howling the whole way as he forced himself through the pain into town.

It's a long walk, he realizes once he's up the main road that leads past the different small businesses, the houses. He must be a sight, a real one this time. Everything hurts, everything. This must be what damnation feels like.

Is he dead? Is he going to try to get to the clinic and never be able to get there? Always right out of reach?

By the time he makes it, he's pale and shaking. Sweat clings to him and makes the experience worse. Each time he tries to shake out his shirt, to make the fabric stop holding into him like a second skin, it makes the pain shoot up through his ribs and into his shoulder and arm. He's so sure he's going to die he just hopes that Doctor Lecter can fill him up with morphine and let him die in in peace.

He knocks on the door, waits a few seconds, and then hears him ask whoever is outside to wait as he's with a patient. Will slumps down on the bench outside of his little office, every movement makes him hurt worse, even sitting has its faults so he bites his tongue so hard copper blooms in his mouth and stains his teeth. And he waits.

The longer he sits, however, the more the pain feels like it rips him open, it's an astonishing feat that he made it this far and even more so that he's able to sit without screaming. Thank the teeth in his teeth and tongue for that one. He presses the back of his head against the wall and closes his eyes.

The door opens, Beverly Katz is leaving and Hannibal is preparing to greet Will when he catches sight of him. Whatever he was planning to say doesn't come out, instead, he's hauling him inside like his life depends on it–and it might. The feeling of his hands on him is horrifically painful but overwhelmingly comforting, paradoxical, but better than anything else.

"What happened?" He asks as he cuts Will's shirt open, his eyes scan over his ribs and the black bruise already forming over his skin. Some of it is broken, bleeding, but that's the least of their concerns. "It was your horse again, wasn't it?"

"Abigail kicked me good, I gotta kill that damn snake." Will tries to laugh, but the motion of his chest moving makes his body instinctively curl in on itself. Tears burn in his eyes, but he refuses to cry in front of him, he refuses to be weak. "I walked up here, Hannibal. I'm fine."

"You walked all this way?" Hannibal presses him flat against the bed with one hand, and when he whines, he rubs his thumb just under his jaw. "I need you to stay flat, Will. I have to assess the damage to decide if we really need to take you to a hospital."

Will groans, eyes fluttering as the pain washes away for just a few moments at the little bit of affection. "I don't think I'll make it. I don't know how I made it here."

“Nonsense, you walked here, you can make it the distance for a hospital.” Hannibal scolds lightly and then starts feeling his side. “It would just hurt worse.”

His fingers are as gentle as they can be, touching over the bruised skin slowly to feel the bone. It’s absolutely broken, they both know that, but how broken is the question at hand. Whether his ribs are bindable or if they’ve caused damage that he can’t fix here, in his clinic.

The hospital is out, Will would rather die in this bed than in a building too large and too depressing with more than a handful suffering from some kind of disease they can’t cure. He’d rather die near someone who knows him than alone – and like the Messiah to Saul on Damascus road, he’s blinded by a revelation.

He never understood it, why his grandfather or his father would have families knowing they were likely cursed, why they would pass that one to someone, but dying alone seems worse than cursing someone you love. So close that if someone loves you, maybe they should let themselves be cursed for you, too. Maybe they’ll do it willingly.

Will winces when Hannibal’s fingers hit the center point of the bruise, blood oozing out, but he forces himself to lay as Hannibal has instructed him. He doesn’t want this to be any more difficult than it has to be, and he’d prefer to get the bad news out first without much of a fight. It takes a lot of self restraint to do it, but he manages to lay still and flat, only whimpering from the pain occasionally.

After some time, Hannibal gives him a shot of morphine, the prick of the needle and the burning of the medicine more welcome than he ever thought it could be, and it lets him rest. It doesn’t get rid of the pain, far too much damage to fully so that, but the dulling effect is appreciated more than Hannibal will ever know. It’s enough to have him close to sleep. Soft breathes and half dreams as everything seems to fall away around him.

Hannibal is sitting on the edge of the little bed, Will can feel his warmth even as he sweats through the dull pain. He strokes Will’s cheek, a softness present that doesn’t exactly seem normal of a doctor-patient relationship. “You’d be dead if your lung was punctured. I believe your ribs are just broken and you’ve bruised badly. You’re very lucky.”

Will nods once, licks his dry lips, and opens his eyes to look at him. “Good thing then. I always seem to be lucky.”

Hannibal stands and Will, inhibition lost in the morphine and pain, laments the loss. If he were any better, it would be an embarrassing thing, but he’s not, and he doesn’t want to be alone. He wants more of the soft affection he’s receiving, because he’s going to live and he’s never known such gentleness.

He comes back with a cup of water, cold from the sink, and helps Will up to drink it greedily. He hadn’t realized just how thirsty he is, but he downs the contents in less than a thirty seconds and then is placed back on the little bed.

“You have to stay here, there’s no room for debate. I have to ensure your ribs stay in place until I can adequately bind them.” Hannibal drops the cup down onto the desk beside the bed.

“I know if you go you’ll work yourself to death. Peter can look over everything while you’re here.”

“No, no, he can’t. It’ll be bad for him.” Will tries to push himself up, suddenly remembering the ranch and the cattle and the dogs, but folds from the pain. He hates that he’s right, he hates that he knows that. “You don’t get it, they’ll think he’s cursed if he’s there too long. I can’t do that to Peter.”

“Will,” the hand on his shoulder is gentle despite the fact it’s meant to be holding him down. “Do you honestly believe your family is cursed?”

Will looks at him and settles, there’s a truth to everything. Yes and no and maybe. Could all be the worst luck in the world, but it could also be a curse. “My grandpa got cursed in Louisiana, that's why he left and came out here. Cursed him, then apparently the land too. Anyone who works it will die. It’s not really the land, but enough blood’s been spilled there, it’s no good.”

Hannibal’s thumb brushes just over his collarbone. “Will, you are a very smart man. I’m not telling you it couldn’t be, but the likelihood that it is seems small.”

“I’m not superstitious, but I know that every person who has worked there has died too soon. I know that I’ve had more accidents than not.” Will argues weakly. “I know it, I’ve seen it. Ranch hands, mom, dad. Everyone.”

“Why was your family cursed then, Will?” Hannibal whispers, the movement of his thumb against his skin enough to have him relaxing again, losing the fight in him completely.

Will’s side tenses and he moans in pain despite how the rest of him as relaxed. It takes him a few minutes to calm himself enough to talk again. “Couldn’t say. Scorned lover, maybe. That’s what my old man said anyway, and paid someone a good price to do it. It’s a little fuzzy on the timeline, but they always said grandpa was cursed before he was married but didn’t take it too serious until a lot of bad started happening. By then he was too cursed.”

“How did your family members die?” Hannibal brushes a piece of his sweat slicked hair back, then, uses his hand to smooth all of Will’s hair back.

“Grandpa had a heart attack I’m told, grandma bled to death from a miscarriage, same as my momma.” Will bites his lips until his teeth stain red when another wave of pain hits. “Dad… well they never did find much of his body.”

“Oh?” Hannibal hums, trying to hide the sense of intrigue he has over that. “That’s very sad. I’m sorry.”

“I guess, he was a mean son of a bitch. They think some kind of animal must have got a hold of him. Coyote, they said.” Will laughs then, and the pain climbs up into his right arm, but he can’t help but laugh. “Coyote. Must’ve eaten him.”

“Do you believe that?” Hannibal asks, smiling lightly at the sarcastic laughter that punches out of Will’s weak form.

“I’ve never seen anything bigger than a rabbit on the property, and even those I shoot for stew.” Will breathes out, his laughter hurts but it feels worth it. It’s good to laugh, he never does. “I’ve never seen coyotes and I don’t suppose I ever will.”

Hannibal nods once, taking the information in. They look at each other, the unknown sitting heavy, vulnerable between them. The words, they come out, and he’s never told anyone that they don’t get coyotes before. The morphine, must be. It’s got him loose lipped.

“I have never seen a coyote myself, but in my home country of Lithuania, I came face to face with a wolf,” Hannibal says gently, offering him something in turn. “My sister was quite terrified of the story when I told it to her. She was under the impression that she, one day, would encounter a wolf and it would eat her.”

Will grunts, trying to smile. “I imagine she would be. Wolves are terrifying beasts. That must seem like a silly story to her now.”

Hannibal’s eyes tighten as he glances away, he can’t see it, but Will thinks he might have tears in his eyes. “Her fears came true. A wolf–or some beast, did devour her.”

Will looks at him, and against his better judgement and despite his pain, reaches out and grabs his hand. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

The action might startle him, he certainly bristles at the contact. Will has never given off the idea that he might touch Hannibal without some medical need, and maybe it’s the morphine or the pain that makes him do it. Maybe it’s the moment of vulnerability between them, of unspoken truths. A few moments pass though, and Hannibal allows himself to enjoy the touch. He may not get it again, so he should enjoy it.

“I believe she died quickly, my only comfort.” Hannibal squeezes Will’s hand. “Try and rest, once you have I’ll move you to one of the private rooms. You’ll be much more comfortable and I’ll be able to give you better care.

“I am sorry about you sister,” Will says, hushed, as Hannibal gives him another shot. More morphine to put him to sleep, he guesses. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Thank you for telling me about your family.” Hannibal cleans the droplet of blood from where the needle went into his skin and brushes his hair back again. “You are the only person I believe could truly understand. Thank you for listening.”

He’s able to keep Will in one of the back rooms of his little clinic for three days before he demands to leave. Once the morphine is out of his system and the pain returns fully, he realizes that he’s letting too much happen between them. Too many touches, too many stories about about their lives, what they do, what they wanted to do. Will tells him he isn’t sure one cow is worth all this, and Hannibal tells him not to concern himself with it, he’d do this for free.

The fantasy breaks, and Will removes himself from the clinic. Hannibal tells him he should stay, that he’s hardly well enough to do any sort of physical labor, but he leaves anyway.

To make up for the work he loses, he lets Peter stay for two weeks and then for another three he hires some kid who doesn't know him from Adam's house cat. It's good, it helps a lot, and once those five weeks have passed, he kicks the kid off the ranch and goes back to how he's always been. He's not that selfish, not like his dad was.

The broken ribs make working hard, they're much better and still wrapped up, but riding Abigail out into the pastures is horrible, trying to wrangle any wandering cows proves far too challenging to be done in a reasonable amount of time, and by the end of each day he's dirt tired.

Today is one of those days, but he's found a little time to relax which he appreciates. Since he's been back on full time he's been suffering, problem after problem, issue after issue. Things break, or a cow is sick, or one of his dogs gets bit by a snake and he has to put it down. He wants it to end, but today most of the cows are behaved and the sun isn't beating down on him like hellfire so he takes it for the small reprieve that it is.

He sits for hours out there, his horse tied up to a post, the dogs running around him as he rests against a tree with a jug of water and a few dry biscuits. His ribs are twitching still, the pain comes in waves, but it's not bad.

The cows chew grass just a hundred feet ahead of him as he sips his water. He's got a good batch this year, the ones ready for slaughter will be premium, and the one for the good Doctor Lecter is fattening up nicely. He's still trying to separate himself from the fantasy he created while he was being taken care of.

He's a doctor, for Christ's sake, of course he took care of him. That's his job, what he agreed to do when he finished medical school. Still, even though he tries to reason with himself that he's reading too much into it, he can't shake the feeling that it would be a disservice to himself to not try at least. Who cares if he's reading it wrong? Who cares if his family is cursed? He can try and if, if he's wrong, then he'll come back to Graham Ranch and lean more into the curse than before.

"He's a good doctor," he muses to Abigail and his pack of dogs. Going back and forth between if he should go to him or if he should wait for the next inevitable injury. "Very efficient."

The horse chews a mouthful of grass, unamused with him as she usually is.

"He's offered to have me for dinner, nothing's special, but I could go if I really wanted to. He's saved my life considering the amount of times you've tried to kill me." Will glibs, giving the horse a pointed glare. "I might take him up on the offer. Just as a friendly thing. I could be friendly with people."

One of the dogs sniffs at his pocket for treats that he doesn't currently have. He could go into town, to the butcher and get more cuts of meat for them, but he's closed on the weekends.

"I think he knows about Alana and Margot, he hinted. He seemed okay with it, like maybe he was gauging if I was okay with it too." Will tosses one of the biscuits to Buster who eats it, and some grass. He laughs, and leans his head back against the tree he's leaned against.

“Most people wouldn’t be if they knew. Not unless they had similar afflictions, and they usually marry whoever is convient. I could take a wife, I like women just as well, but he’s different I think. The things I feel for him are different than anyone.”

Finally, he gets up, ready to get back to work. “I’ll wait. I’m sure something’ll happen.”

The problem he faces then is the fact he goes a full six weeks without an incident. His ribs heal up nicely, the ranch gets on, Abigail is calm, and none of his tools break to give him a reason to carry himself on into town.

This makes him antsy, uncomfortable. Maybe that’s ridiculous, maybe it’s foolish, but he tries to get hurt so he can see him. Each day that passes feels like a mile he’s putting between him and Hannibal. It makes it worse that the Doctor doesn’t come out to see him, it validates all the thoughts Will had that he made it all up, that those little touches, that when he touched his hand in the mercantile, were nothing more than friendly gestures that he went wild with.

Sometimes he hopes he’ll come on by, way out of his way, but that he’d make a house visit so he doesn’t have to feel so crazy for hoping. However, Will’s sure if he wanted any information he could get in from Peter who’s likely to tell him he’s in good health and doesn’t want one visitor on his land–just as Will always told him to tell people.

So, when he nears the end of the seventh week, he decides he can’t take it anymore. For a few hours he debates hurting himself, he could cut himself and need some stitches, bust his head open, fall down the stairs, but he decides against it. No need to give him a need for stitches, it won’t solve any of his problems. He needs to look at him with pain and know. He settles on a lie, an illness, something that’ll get him looked at but won’t get him those worried glances that confuse him. Or those hands that he can’t quite figure out.

Will hoists himself up on his horse and comes into town like something’s happened. He’s restless, and when he tries to come up and around the building to step into Hannibal’s office, Margot Verger stops him.

“You’re in quite the rush, Will,” she snickers. “Whatever could be the problem?”

“I need to speak to Doctor Lecter,” he says flatly. “It’s urgent.”

She pauses and looks him over, trying to find his latest bump or bruise that could require medical attention. “You don’t look sick, or hurt. Doctor Lecter is very tight lipped about your care, you know, Freddie is always trying to find something so she can run it through the paper. I’m amazed you even let him treat you, given your distaste for doctors in the past.”

Will narrows his eyes at her. “I don’t care for conmen, but Doctor Lecter has proved himself.”

“Alana says he likes you a great deal.” She smiles, putting one hand on his arm. “And she would know, he lends her books on medicine. He’s training her to work under him. People like him a lot, they come for miles just to see him, but you’re so far out on that ranch you’d never know.”

Will's arm prickles where she touches him and something vile flairs up in his chest. "Oh, well, he's a good doctor. I'd recommend him even to Freddie Lounds."

She can tell she's bothered him, and as much as Margot likes Will, she also likes to see him squirm. "That Dimmond fellow from Greencreek seems rather taken with him. He's a rancher too, I believe? Not as good as you, we all know, but, he makes the trip. Oh, and that woman, the blonde woman. I forget her name, the rich lady that owns all the land 45 miles north? She makes her visits too. I've seen them around town together."

Will's lip twitches downward, his shoulder square. "Give my best to your sapphist roommate but I'm pretty sick, Margot. I've got to go, would hate to give you what I got." He fakes a cough, and while he knows she doesn't believe him, she lets him go.

He stomps off, his boots kicking up dust in his dramatics. The idea that Hannibal could value anyone remotely as much as he values Will gets under his skin even though he knows it could very well be true. In the back of his mind he knows his jealousy is unfounded, Hannibal has never so much as suggested that he might prioritize Will. Why couldn't he prioritize someone else? Antony Dimmond was just as good as anyone, or that woman, Bedelia Du Maurier. Both fine options for his affection–but Will doesn't want that. He wants to be the center of Hannibal's affection, of his attention, of his devotion. He doesn't even want him to value god above him. He wants to be special.

He doesn't knock, doesn't announce himself like he should, like the Doctor prefers. If Hannibal has a patient, so be it, they can leave, nothing to him is more important than this. He comes up onto the little porch of his clinic building, lets himself in the front door and past the little clinical room, the private rooms, and appears in Hannibal's office like something drug in by a storm, wild and uncontrolled.

Luckily, he's alone, scribbling away notes with a music box playing in the background. He glances up at Will, momentarily surprised by the intrusion. He opens his mouth to say something but Will cuts in before he has the pleasure.

"I think I have dysentery," he speeds out, each word jumbled on the last like snagged fabric. "I'm real sick, Doctor Lecter."

Hannibal's eyebrows come together as he glances over Will. "Really? What are your symptoms?"

"I've been coughing." It's the first thing that comes out of his mouth, and immediately he knows that's the wrong symptom. He knows he fucked up and that he looks ridiculous and they both can see that this was some sort of desperate attempt at attention.

A few seconds pass as Will accepts his shame. Hannibal closes the book, pencil getting placed in a cup, and gestures for Will to sit down. "You could have said you had influenza and I would have been more likely to believe you."

"I do have a cough." Will insists as he sits, faking the same cough that he had with Margot.

Hannibal laughs at that, disbelief brightening his features. It shouldn't, but that little action calms Will down. He picks up the stethoscope from where it's hung up so he can listen to Will's lungs. Instructing him to breathe in, breathe out, cough for him. It's cold as it presses against his skin, less intimate, but he revels in the slight attention.

"You sound fine," Hannibal tells him. "Possibly a cold if you're insistent about this cough."

"You sure? Check again." Will half-begs, not wanting to leave yet. "It doesn't feel like a cold. I really think it's worse than that.

Hannibal gives him a look and places his stethoscope down. He folds his hands in his lap and looks over him, trying to pin down the exact reason Will's come and embarrassed himself in front of him. It's obvious, Will thinks, but he'd never say that–and he thinks it's obvious that this was a mistake and he should have buried these feelings deeper.

This was a stupid idea, worse than when he was 15 and he tried to run off with Molly Foster. He shouldn't have come to town, he shouldn't have talked to Margot, and he definitely shouldn't have come into Hannibal's office without knocking. Hannibal is his doctor, their relationship is professional. Whatever else Will thought was happening, it was made up. His father always said he had a wild imagination, this is just another example of it.

Hannibal begins to pack up his desk for the day. "You've come all this way, stay for dinner."

Will stutters at first, just syllables coming out before he can manage words. "I don't–"

"You'd be doing me a favor." Hannibal stands up and goes to grab his coat. "I always cook too much nor have I had someone to entertain in some time."

Will relents, but feels worse than he did when he stomped up here with purpose. Perhap he really is coming down with a cold because his body is trembling and his chest feels heavy and going to Hannibal's house won't make this better for him at all. He reminds himself that many people have been invited to Hannibal's table, he's not special. He may even be less special than the people who came before him.

What he would do to be able to ask, to put it out in the air and see if Hannibal feels the same, or at least understands where he's coming from. He can take rejection, he's so used to it by now, but what he can't take is rejection from a place of hatred. Don't they understand each other? Or was that just something he said to be nice?

The house Hannibal escorts him to isn't actually in town, not that he expected it to be. It requires him to take Abigail down a long path he wasn't aware existed until he comes to a house that has to be new–has to have been made specifically for his Doctor.

It's nice, state of the art. Painted a comfortable green color, with clean glass windows and flowerbeds in the front. It has to be at least two floors, and he can't see how a single man would need so much space. Instead of enjoying the view, the beauty of the house, he thinks about everyone else who was here before, how they all felt the exact same way Will does, and how he's nothing more than a patient to Hannibal. That's it, that's all. This is him being

kind. He's had all of his associates for dinner, he cares for all his patients the same, Will is just down right stupid.

When he gets inside, it's almost astounding how nice the house is. The ranch house is smaller as it's the same house his grandfather lived in, but he's made a good bit of improvements since it came into his possession but this? This house feels almost royal. When he told Will he wasn't hurting for money, he obviously meant it because there's no way a town doctor who trades his services for goods could afford something so nice.

"You have a very nice house." Will tries to tamper his reaction. "Very… lovely. I've never seen anything like it."

Hannibal smiles at him, hanging his coat up by the door. "Thank you, Will. The inside is meant to resemble my home in Paris. Not an exact copy of course, but something that feels close. I value my comfort."

Will nods and follows him through the house. It's too big for one person, now he's sure of it. This is the kind of house someone owns when they have more money than they know what to do with. This is stupid rich, from a long line of people with wealth. All the wood is carved beautifully, delicately. The furniture is perfect, and there are flowers in vases wherever seems appropriate to have them.

The Graham's were always seen as rich around here, but this? This makes Will's little fortune seem like pennies. He can't imagine living like this, he can't imagine being able to afford to.

Hannibal brings him into the dining room. A spacious room with art on the walls from painters he's never heard of and herbs growing fresh. "I've had the food simmering since my lunch break, please make yourself comfortable while I make our plates."

Another spectacle that Will doesn't allow himself to get lost in. This is all normal and– Margot has seen him out with Bedelia Du Maurier, an eligible and obviously similar class of woman. Of course, of course. His mind and its fantasies, his father always did say it made him believe in wildness. He has to keep telling himself that, to remind him of his fathers words.

The dining room has a grand mahogany table with eight chairs, and a beautiful arrangement of flowers across the middle. God knows where he got that from, there's no florist in this town, and he doesn't know if there's one in the town over.

He doesn't let himself gawk too much. That would be inappropriate, and he knows just what kind of trouble it could get him in. Instead, he sits himself down and waits patiently for Hannibal. He rubs the knuckle of one finger over the lacquered wood and starts devising a plan. What he should say, when it's appropriate to leave, how to absolutely never see Doctor Hannibal Lecter again. He'll have to give him the cow of course, but maybe he could have Peter do it? That seems like a good bet to him.

Slowly, he works out the logistics of how that'll work. God, maybe he'll die before he has to give it to him. Maybe he should go ahead and write a will. Put it in big letters that Peter is to

give Hannibal that cow and then to burn his body and use to ashes like fertilizer. All in all, that sounds like a great plan in the three minutes it took to put it together.

A small plate is placed in front of him, making him come out of his thoughts and back to reality. Before him is some kind of stew, or more like, a study on stew with fragrant rice and little sprouts of green sitting on the top. It definitely isn't stew like he makes, but it looks exactly like something the well tailored Doctor would come up with when the word stew is mentioned.

Hannibal sits down at the head of the table and smiles at Will, pleased with himself. "I hope you enjoy this meal. I thought of you when I made it so I'm happy I can share it with you."

Will is cautious about it all. Feeling like an intruder is disturbing, and the longer he sits here beside Hannibal, the worse that feeling gets. He shouldn't be here, he shouldn't have went into town today. This is wrong, this is all wrong and he's stupid. He should have turned right around when Margot told him what she saw but jealousy took hold and now he's here, sitting at a table that never should host him, about to eat the idea of stew.

Part of him wants to get up and leave, but he knows that it would be rude to reject this now, he's already too far in. He takes a small bite. The flavor of the gravy coupled with the rice is astonishing, he's far more pleased with it than he could have ever imagined. Hannibal must be able to sense his pleasure because he finally picks up his fork.

He swallows and takes a second bite, Hannibal's eyes on him like he's in a daze. Will clears his throat and looks at him. "What kind of meat is this?"

Hannibal's eyes refocus in and he gives Will a coy smile, like he's happy he asked. Like he was counting on it. "It's rabbit."

Will looks at him, takes another bite and chews it for too long to be sure of the texture. This isn't rabbit, he knows that. He knows it's not rabbit, chicken, beef, or pork. He was thinking he must have misplaced the flavor, that certainly it was some… imported bird, but what reason would Hannibal have to lie? "Must have… seasoned it strangely."

Hannibal's smile widens and Will swallows hard. The air around them thickens as they stare at each other, Will wide eyed and Hannibal's maroon eyes impossibly darker,

"Does it not taste like rabbit, Will?" Hannibal takes his first bite of the meal.

He's pleased with himself, Will can tell. His smile isn't the same smile it often is in his clinic. It's like he's caught Will in some sort of lie, or like they both are aware of this particular lie.

Silence engulfs them for a long while, the both of them eating and then looking back at each other to see who might break first. Will they say what this meat is? Will they actually break that final wall? Does everyone know what this is when they eat it? They can't, not by the way Jack was talking in the mercantile all those weeks ago. No, this is some kind of secret, one that he's let Will on. One that he knows he understands, even if he doesn't want to.

He said that Will was the only person who would get it, who could understand. He wasn't lying, and now Will wishes he hadn't come into town for a whole new reason.

Will finally looks at him and sees him for the first time maybe ever. He may very well be the only person who's ever seen Hannibal Lecter for all that he is. "Not any rabbit I've ever had."

Hannibal hums, taking another delicate forkful into his mouth. "Then what does it taste like to you?"

Will stares at him blankly. He debates telling him what it is, what he knows it is and how he knows where he got it, but he doesn't. It's like he doesn't want to break this moment, like if he acknowledges this more than he has, it'll ruin the night. "I couldn't place it if I tried."

So, he is special. Special in the sort of way he never thought about being. No one else was ever supposed to know about this, and it's taken him this long to realize he gave Hannibal all of the tools to figure this out about him. What's worse is, he isn't sure that he really minds. It's a relief, if anything, to have it out in the air.

They continue their dinner. Hannibal takes that answer and offers seconds to which Will accepts begrudgingly. Then dessert, which is some Italian dish Will had never heard of but likes greatly. So much so Hannibal offers to make it for him again, and Will, so greedy, and already forgotten about his own self hatred and embarrassment, agrees and thanks him for the offer.

They clear the table together, washing and drying the dishes in a silence that grows more and more comfortable as they endings in it and then Hannibal guides him up to a room he calls his study. It's larger, with books and a fireplace, a desk, and the sort of couch he's only ever seen in picture books about royalty. There's plenty of things, collections of dead insects, statues and busts. It all interests him and he finds himself walking around, touching and looking at the different things.

"I used to pin butterflies." Will glances over the little creatures in their glass cases. He's never seen so many. Butterflies and moths and beetles, insects he doesn't know the names of, all beautifully done. "I wasn't very good."

"I grew fond of them, beauty is often so fleeting. If we cna preserve it, we should." Hannibal pours him a glass of whiskey. "This room I enjoy coming to in private."

Will, two glasses of wine in from dinner and now sipping on whiskey, nearly snorts. "With Bedelia Du Maurier? Or Antony Dimmond?"

Hannibal closes the bottle and sips his own whiskey. He glances over at Will and tilts his head. There's confusion there, Will thinks, but not anger. He doesn't seem defensive by being called out. "No, not at all, actually. Mr. Dimmond has never had the pleasure of being more than a patient and as for Miss Du Maurier, while I find her entertaining, even intellectually stimulating, I would never wish to know her more than I do. As my acquaintance."

Will pales and places his crystal cup down. The cold whiskey makes the glass sweat, and Will stares into the dark liquid. "Sorry, that was uncalled for."

“No one has ever come to my study but you, Will. When people visit, I typically entertain in my parlor room.” Hannibal says and eyes the glass Will placed back down. “There’s no need to be more intimate than that.”

He picks it back up, feeling strange about being disrespectful and strange about the idea he’s in this room and the fire is lit and they’re close together. So close. “I’m sorry, I’ve – never mind. I don’t typically drink this much.”

“Alcohol has the ability to loosen the tongue, I will not hold you accountable if it makes you say something you didn’t mean.” Hannibal says and gestures toward the couch.

When they sit, it’s probably far too close, their knees bumping, elbows brushing. Will takes another gulp of his whiskey. He’s reading too much into these things, or… he isn’t. Or this is exactly what he thinks it is. He’s not crazy, he hasn’t made this whole thing up with his wild imagination. No, Hannibal is close to him, their breaths intermingle, they laugh over things that no one else would.

Like the bush to Moses, the words are whispered to Will from the whiskey sweet lips of Hannibal. “I believe you and I are quite similar, like minded in many ways.”

Will leans just a bit closer, his whiskey forgotten and places down on the little table beside the couch. “How did you come to that conclusion?”

“I have been trying to come up with ways that would be appropriate to come by your home.” Hannibal admits, but uses it as an example. “It would seem you’ve been trying to find reasons to see me, too, given your poor excuse.”

The words hit him, dig into his skin like a bullet and corrupt him like lead. It seems too good to be true, it seems too real. His ribs hurt again, but not because they were broken. He can’t place this pain, but it’s sick in his stomach and makes his teeth tingle and his heart pound. He could climb the wall, beat his head into a table, find god, and reject him.

“To make sure I was still alive. Your cow’s doing good, she’ll be ready by the end of the year.” Will moves to grab his cup again and rub his finger over the flat edges of it, trying to laugh off the feeling that seems to burrow more and more into him. “I wouldn’t forget it, I promise. I’ve always been good on my word.”

Hannibal shakes his head, putting one hand over Will’s. “I’ve grown fond of you, I wished to see you for the pleasure of it but Peter was very sure that you wouldn’t appreciate the company.”

Will’s leg bounces, he doesn’t know what to look at, his glass, Hannibal’s hand on his, or in the man’s eyes. It feels like a lot all at once, it doesn’t feel like enough. “I feel… the same, Doctor Lecter.”

Hannibal leans forward, his lips are soft, warm against Will’s. It’s more hesitant than he’s expecting, like maybe he’s been questioning if he was reading too much into Will too. The entire thing, for those few seconds, feels incredibly innocent.

He doesn't immediately kiss him back, unsure, terribly unsteady. It's more than his mind can handle, having this moment, it's unlike anything he's felt before. Hannibal pulls back slightly, and while he doesn't look embarrassed, his eyes flash in a way that tells him he fears he miscalculated.

Oh to fear, Will knows that all too well.

For a second, he debates saying something more, to reassure him, but stops himself knowing that words aren't going to help, and closes the gap again. A tentative kiss at first, much like Hannibal's, he cups his face in one of his rough hands and feels Hannibal's own hand come up the lay atop his. He takes that for what it is and deepens the kiss, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth and then licking his way into his whiskey-sweet mouth. His hand moves, fingers dipping into his hair as he discards his cup haphazardly and so he can use his other hand.

Once it's placed down, Will uses his free hand to grab him by the waist and flip Hannibal to his back, pressing his body weight against him, and swallow the moans that come out of his mouth when Will rolls his hips down hard.

He bites into his lip, and Hannibal's hips meet his, both men breath catching at the feeling. If Will could, he'd devour him entirely, swallowing down tongue and teeth and soul until Hannibal was his completely. Fuck it all, he wants him like Christian's want grace, like god wants the seventh day, like David wanted Jonathan.

"Will," Hannibal breathes when they both pull back to work on the buttons of their shirts, "please."

He pulls back completely then, fumbling to open his pants as Hannibal does the same. He's never done anything like this, not with a man, but he's determined to do it right. He's never felt like this before, and he can't mess it up now. He needs to be good, that's all that matters in this moment. Not the fact Hannibal could very well be using him, not the curse, not the fact he needs to get back to the ranch. None of it.

In the lowlight, Will can see Hannibal's cock, shining with precome as he stares up at Will in lustful desperation. There's so much he wants to do, so much he doesn't know if he can, but he knows he has to do something. They're both bare, uncomfortably hard, and vulnerable in every way two people can be. In the back of his mind he knows he may never get a chance like this again, so he needs to make the most of it.

Will lays back down over him, kissing him hard as he wraps a shaky hand around their cocks and begins a slow slide down. It's a strange feeling, good, but strange. The feeling of another man's cock against his, of it in his hand, it's enough to make him come out of his skin. He doesn't know if he's doing it right either, but given by the way Hannibal whines into his mouth, he thinks he's got the right idea.

Hannibal moans, body twitching, when Will brings his hand all the way up so he can rub his thumb over the heads of their cocks. He feels the same, pressing his forehead to Hannibal's and pressing needy kisses to his lips each time he finds a new way to hold his hand, to squeeze, to bring as much pleasure to them both as he can.

His hand is soaked in Hannibal's precome within the first two minutes, sticky and warm and helping the slide of it all as he speeds up, finding an appropriate rhythm that can bring them closer to the edge. He hates how mechanical he thinks about it, but he wants to make sure Hannibal feels as good as possible, he needs him to feel good. He needs to be good.

"God," Will breathes in between kisses. "You're so wet."

Hannibal makes a noise from the back of his throat, trying to swallow air and keep whatever pathetic noises he wants to make down. Even with Will's hand moving over them, they've both taken to clinging, pressing sloppy kisses against each others welcoming mouths, and rocking into his hand to try and bring them even closer. It's so much, it's so pathetic of them both.

Will strokes his hand all the way down to the base of their cocks, squeezes it tightly, and then strokes back up, picking up the pace each time he does so, forcing more precome out of them. He can feel the heartbeat in his cock, twitching, wet, and sensitive. Neither of them will last much longer, and while he wishes it could go on, he knows that they both need this. He can feel it deep in his soul.

"Tighter," Hannibal mumbles into their kiss, "Will–yes, like that."

The pressure of his hand, the feeling of Hannibal's slick cock against him, is enough to make Will's stomach pool with a beautiful heat. He wants him, he wants him in every way he can possibly have him, and he's determined to have him. He'd do it right now if he could, strip them both bare and fuck into him until their both trembling – maybe he will one day, but he doesn't want to get ahead of himself now. He's barely been given this.

He presses his forehead to Hannibal's again, his legs tense and untense as the whole of him finally breaks, and he comes hard, hand jerking fast over them both, covered in his spend, and Hannibal's hands come up into his hair, grabbing for him as he comes just seconds after.

Will rubs them both until they're breathless and aching and tired. Their cocks soften, and they breath against reach other, holding tight as they try to regain themselves. Will kisses Hannibal's hair, and Hannibal, his shoulder. It's tender, it feels like being real lovers.

It takes them both time before they're willing to pull apart, the haze of what just happened slowly falling away and leaving them both sweaty, sticky, and with stained clothes. Will almost laughs at that, and he nearly feels bad for ruining one of the Doctor's shirts. He doesn't though, Hannibal's looking up at him completely unreadable, alarming Will immediately.

When he sits up, hand covered in a mix of their come and his senses fully return to him, he realizes what he's done. The alarm he felt with Hannibal's unscrupulous gaze heightens until he's sure he's misstepped somewhere. This isn't something he can come back from either, as badly as he wants more, he knows that this could have been a step too far for both of them. Quickly, he zips and buttons his pants and attempts to steady himself, forcing himself up off the couch and off of Hannibal.

Hannibal tucks himself back into his pants, touches the sleeve of Will's shirt, and says, "there's a bathroom down the hall to the left. If you would like, you could stay the night?"

Will stands without another word, walks down to the bathroom, cleans his hand and spot cleans his shirt, and then walks straight out of the front door, mounts his horse, and leaves. It's wrong of him, he knows, and his stomach lurches at the pain he's causing himself, but it feels like he's doing the right thing. He's so conflicted over this, he wants Hannibal but he doesn't want to break the peace he's given himself and–he wanted him to stay and he left, or did he? He didn't even tell him he was going, he just let himself out, who's the say that wasn't the final nail in his coffin? Or worse?

He knows what the stew was. They both do, and now they have that against each other. Does that matter? Or would Hannibal kill him for this?

He goes straight home, walks up the stairs, and locks the door behind him. He strips down and lays in the bed, under his itchy quilt, and thinks about the night. They were together, they both know the worst things they've done, and he still got spooked and left. He's no better than his horse, he's no better than a beaten dog.

There's no going back now. He can't ever see him again, even if he wanted to–and he does want to. What if that isn't what he meant? What if he did that and Hannibal just let him? Kissing doesn't automatically mean more–what if he's disgruntled by Will's departure and he tells people Will came onto him? He'll never recover. What if this didn't mean as much for Hannibal as it did for Will? Not that he would know that because of Will's quick and wordless departure.

He decides he'll lay low for a while, communicate with him about his cow through Peter alone, and never step foot back into town unless he absolutely has to. If he gets hurt and dies, so be it, but he either completely disrespected Hannibal or Hannibal was going to use him for one night of pleasure alone or he took it too far, which wouldn't surprise him, he's horrible at knowing what people want romantically. All of these ideas mess with his head in different way, putting him into different levels of distress.

If no one shows up to speak of Will's indecency, to arrest him and have him hanged, then he's safe. If someone does… There's nothing that can be done at this point. It's too late. He'll have to take it like a man.

He runs the ranch like he always has, maybe a little colder with Peter than he should be, but things go smooth for about a week and a half. Then Peter tells him that Doctor Lecter is asking about him, and not just about the cow. He wants to know if Will is well, if he'll be into town any time soon, and Peter isn't sure completely, but he thinks maybe the Doctor is worried he has upset Will.

Will tells him that the Doctor doesn't need to worry about him. He's completely fine, and he's not upset with him in any way. He's just busy with work and can't take the time right now to leave the ranch. It's that simple.

For a time, he thinks that works. Peter doesn't bring up Hannibal and Will is able to start separating himself from all the confusing feelings he had for him. It doesn't seem like he's

going to out him, and that offers him a little comfort. It lets him through himself into work and gets him to start working on some renovations he's been meaning to install in the house, and fix a few things around the ranch.

He gets another five days of anxious oeace before his dogs go crazy one night, howling and yapping and running up the dirt road like they've seen death himself.

Will steps out of his little living room and onto his porch to see what they're losing it over. He's expecting, for just one moment, Jack Crawford, or a crowd of people disgusted with him. It's a silly fear, he realizes quickly. There's one horse, being tied to a post on his fence by Hannibal.

Will doesn't move from where he stands, leaning against the door frame, the gun he brought out hanging at his side now. "I don't need a house call, Doctor. I'm alive."

"Will." Hannibal says, eyeing the gun before he brings himself to the steps up to his house. "I'm worried about you."

"I told Peter to tell you I was fine." Will grunts, rubbing his hand over his face. "I'm busy, the ranch doesn't run itself you know. I can't make social calls like your other little friends."

Hannibal's lips thin. Will's being harsh, he knows it, and they both know why. The man at the bottom of his steps smooths his hands over his coat. "I feel I should apologize."

Will's eyes narrow. "What do you have to apologize for?"

Hannibal's face tightens more than usual, an attempt to be open with him, vulnerable. "Perhaps you felt a certain… obligation, the other night. I didn't intend for you to feel as if you had to do anything if you didn't want to."

They stare at each other, trying to decipher is either of them are right about this, and coming up with completely different answers. Maybe they are more alike than either of them care to admit, maybe they're conjoined, destined to meet out here in the middle of nowhere.

Will opens his door and places his gun back in, feeling foolish for getting it out in the first place. He shakes his head and crosses his arms. "I didn't feel obligated to do anything. I did what I wanted to."

"Then why did you leave without a word?" Hannibal asks, smoothing his hands down his coat again. He keeps doing that, less of a grooming thing than Will thought. "That was terribly rude, Will."

"You seemed strange after." Will answers honestly. It's all he has left now. "Seemed too real, I suppose. I'm good at convincing myself I've made a mistake."

"My intentions were not to make you feel uncomfortable, but to allow you to know the truth of my feelings toward you." Hannibal cautiously takes the first step up, wary of Will like he might reach back inside and take the gun, shoot him dead where he stands. "You are more than I expected."

Will laughs at that, full in his belly and pushes himself off of the door frame. He's embarrassed, but he's okay with laughing at himself, and Hannibal, at the ridiculousness of all of this. "And what is the truth of your feelings, Doctor Lecter?"

Hannibal takes the second step, pushing his luck. "I find that I wish to be close to you, in whatever way you'll allow. I wish to spend my days near you, I have desired you this way since I first met you."

"Since you first–tell me why you come here, honestly?" Will moves just a bit closer. "Tell me and I'll decide how I feel."

He knows how he feels but, he wants to know. He needs to know. He knows why Will is here, why he can't ever really leave, but who goes to medical school and decides they want to move to the middle of nowhere? He's some sort of nobility, rich beyond measure, smart and well traveled. All of those things point toward a life in one of the cities, entertaining the masses, taking a pretty wife to give him little heirs to whatever money his family has.

Hannibal's eyebrows come together in a way that Will has come to enjoy. It means he's confused, it means Will has found a way to make him prickly. "To tell you–"

"No, not to my ranch. To America. Here, specifically." Will rolls his eyes half heartedly. "I feel too similar to deny it, but I can't have you unless you give me the honest truth of it. You didn't come all the way out here out of the goodness of your heart."

Hannibal blinks slowly, raises his chin and straightens himself up. This is a new kind of vulnerability. "The same reason your grandfather moved here. To escape."

Will stares at him, taking in the full form of him. He really is something, a force of nature, and a damn good doctor. He wants to know it all, to find everything in Hannibal, to learn it inside and out and then let Hannibal do the same to him.

"You didn't feed me rabbit," he whispers. "That's why you needed to escape Paris."

"And yet you ate it," Hannibal reminds him. "Despite what you knew it to be. Despite how you knew what it was, you let me know that I was lying and you ate it anyway."

Another long beat of silence. Somewhere in his yard, crickets chirp, beetles sing, and he knows he's right. He knew and he let him know it, no one in their right mind would call him out for something like that, especially not while taking another bite of their meal. Any normal reaction would be to gag, to throw up and run and warn the town. Will didn't do any of that.

"I'm gonna die younger than I should, it's destiny. Could you live with that?" Will asks instead of acknowledging more of their dinner. "That wouldn't be fair to you."

"It was my destiny to die in Lithuania, Paris, Italy, but here I am." Hannibal assures like it's somehow the same. Maybe it is. "Here I am."

"You think you'll keep me alive?" He's almost accusing him, like he's too cocky. Lots of people said his grandfather wouldn't die, that his dad wouldn't that his mom would carry that

baby to term. Where are they now?

“I have done a rather good job of it so far.” Hannibal tells him, rather pleased with himself. “Don’t you agree?”

Will comes to stand against the post at the front of the porch, everything around the is dark and buzzing and the dogs have made their ways up the porch to sniff them both for treats. He thinks about reaching out, just like he did when his ribs were broken, his fingers itch to do it, to hold him or more. To keep him.

“You think you’re stronger than god then?” He questions, more serious than he should be.

“God has no value in me so why should I have value in him?” Hannibal takes the next to last step, putting them nearly face to face. “If he were so powerful you’d be dead, or the town would know that a coyote could have never eaten your father. He has little sense of justice, Will, you know this as well as I do.”

Will adjusts uncomfortably, having to convince himself not to take a step back. He clears his throat, making a vague gesture with his hand to tell Hannibal that they’ll be going inside. “I’ve got a chill.”

“Would you like me to assess it?” Hannibal asks once they’re standing in the doorway, the dogs mobbing them to get in first. “We could find ways to treat such an affliction.”

Will turns and touches his side, rubs his fingers over the light blue fabric of his shirt. Hannibal finds his hand and brings it to his lips, kissing over his fingers softly.

Finally, Will brings him inside and helps him out of his coat. The coat is discarded, and Will’s hand comes up to cup Hannibal’s neck. He holds him, his fingers splaying out over the bones of his spine in his neck like rosary. “Yes, Doctor Lecter, I think I would like that very much.”

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